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INTRODUCTION TO EDICTS OF AS'OKA

(PRIYADARS'IN)

BY

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EXTRACT FROM THE FOREWORD TO THE EDICTS OF AS'OKA

"To S'rī C. Jinarājadāsa, the President of the Theosophical Society, we owe the inspiration to bring out a translation of the As'okan Edicts together with the original text, Sanskrit *Chāyā* and transliteration in Roman script. The purpose of the translation is to present a popular edition of the edicts of the great Emperor and to give the precepts contained therein, the widest publicity possible; for, his message of tolerance, concord, peace and *Dharma Vijaya* is of special value at the present day. *Samavāya eva Sādhuḥ* (Concord alone is excellent), proclaimed the great Emperor when he was faced with the problem of rival religions, philosophies and systems of thought prevalent in his vast empire; and he tried to solve the problem by emphasizing the essential unity and agreement with regard to the fundamental verities in all of them and by achieving *samavāya* (concord, harmony or integration) among the diverse systems.

To Professor K. V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, the great historian and archæologist we are deeply grateful for the most valuable Introduction which he has contributed at great personal inconvenience. It will be an impertinence on our part to comment on the quality of any work which the learned Professor undertakes to execute. All his works are perfect models for others to follow."

This Introduction which is printed as part of the *Edicts of As'oka* (*Priyadars'in*) published as No. 72 of the Adyar Library Series is now issued as a separate pamphlet on account of its very high value to scholars and others interested in the subject.

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INTRODUCTION

AMONG historical records that have come down to our times the inscriptions of the Emperor As'oka are unique. This is so if one considers their language or form, objective, or content, the wide area of their dispersion or their originality. Today they are described as the *Edicts* of As'oka. An edict is an order issued by competent sovereign authority. While in a general sense, as emanating from an Emperor, they may be so described, their general purpose is more ethical than administrative direction. This is why they conform to their description as "sermons in stone." They are intended not for the instruction of contemporaries but for the perpetual guidance of posterity, of future generations of rulers and subjects both in India and outside.

Inscriptions that are drafted in royal chancelleries are in ornate language and begin by a recital of the title of the Ruler, a description of his ancestry and high lineage; they also contain a great deal of self-laudation. These features may be noticed in the famous trilingual inscription of Darius the Great at Behistun to which, from superficial resemblance, the

Inscriptions of As'oka and Darius—a comparison

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records of As'oka have been usually compared; indeed they are held to have been inspired by it. To mark their authenticity, the records of As'oka begin with expressions like "thus said King Priyadars'in," indicating their direct emanation from the Emperor. In the inscription at Behistun, Darius begins thus: "I am Darius, the Great King, the King of Kings, the King of Persia, the King of the Provinces, the son of Hystaspes, the grandson of Arsaces, the Achaemenian—Thus saith Darius the King." As'oka too was an Emperor, the son of an Emperor and the grandson of an Emperor, who, according to the Purāṇic phrase, "brought the whole world under one umbrella." As'oka was the lord of an empire vaster than that of Darius. Yet there is no word in the Edicts to indicate all this. The author describes himself simply as "Rājā," 'king' or 'prince' which any princeling might use.

Distinctive features of the Edicts

The language of the Edicts is the Magadhan vernacular, or *Prākṛt*, and not the refined Sanskrit (*saṁskṛta*). Copies of the Edicts were made in many and widely separated sites in the empire. The unornate and almost rough language (as Senart has pointed out) must represent the actual words of the Emperor, which none under him dared to revise, alter or embellish. It may not represent the actual official language of the administration but the language that the common people all over the wide empire could easily understand. The words of the Edicts show that they came straight from the lips of the Emperor. It would be

difficult otherwise to account for their containing expressions of personal regret and sorrow, rebukes to local officers, declarations of As'oka's intention to publish more edicts of the kind and get them engraved in many parts of the kingdom, and his fear (which we now know to have been baseless) that his very words were not incised correctly everywhere in the edicts that were incised by his command. In one of his latest Edicts (P.E. VII) published twenty-three years after his coronation, he declares that the rescript had been promulgated so that it might endure and be followed as long as the sun and the moon. In Rock Edict XIV he declares that he proposes to have still more edicts written and promulgated, an intention that he fulfilled. Inscriptions usually commemorate a benefaction, dedication or donation, and constitute charters to the beneficiaries. This is not so with the bulk of As'oka's inscriptions. The commemoration of incidents is also a feature of royal inscriptions. This feature is seen in the edict which commemorates the visit of the Emperor to *Saṁbodhi* (the place where the Buddha attained Enlightenment, *i.e.* Buddha-Gaya), the Rummindei inscription, which marks the visit of As'oka in the twentieth year of his coronation to the place where the Buddha was born and the Niglīva Pillar edict which commemorates the erection of a *stūpa* in honour of Kanakamuni Buddha in the fourteenth year of his reign. With such exceptions the edicts contain no direct commemoration of any historical incident of the reign. Important

events, like the conquest of Kaliṅga "after the eighth year from the coronation," come in incidentally to explain certain motives of the Emperor in a later record (*e.g.* Rock Edict XIII). The motive behind the edicts generally is what is stated in R. E. IV—to serve for the instruction of future generations in Dharma till the end of the aeon (*kalpa*). The selection of the most durable forms of publication, by engraving the edicts on rocks that can withstand the ravages of Time, or on huge monolithic pillars that can be trusted to last as long, was with this intention. Kings only address their subjects. As'oka addressed posterity and the people of countries not then subject to him. The Minor Rock Edicts on the southern frontiers of his empire at Siddāpur, Maski and Yerraguḍi were intended for the edification and guidance of independent peoples outside the realm. The best way of ensuring the good conduct of peoples beyond the frontier was to make them fully conversant with the Emperor's policy of peace and amity with all living beings and his earnest desire that they should share his convictions.

Their locale and contents

The location of the Edicts follows a definite plan. Those Rock Edicts that enunciate the broad ethical principles of the Emperor underlying his administrative policy are on the borders of the empire. They were intended for the information and guidance of the independent neighbours as well as the border inhabitants of the empire so that they should have warning

not to embroil the empire in a war with the neighbouring states or peoples left independent by the deliberate self-restraint of the Emperor, who, with an army larger than that of any contemporary, could easily have conquered the border states also much as he had conquered in the early years of the reign the kingdom of Kaliṅga. The Kaliṅga Edicts contain the rules made by As'oka for the pacification of the territory lately conquered after the sanguinary and short war which filled him with remorse and pity and with an aversion to all future conquests by arms. It is noteworthy that the Kaliṅga Edicts contain no reference to the conquest of the area which is only mentioned as the cause of the change of the Emperor's heart in Rock Edict XIII. As'oka's admonition to the Buddhist monks not to promote schisms is appropriately found in the monastery at Sārnāth, where it is declared that " a monk or a nun who divides the *Saṁgha* shall be expelled from the order ", or in the picturesque words of the Edict " be deprived of the ochre-coloured garment of the monk or nun and be made to wear white garments and be put out of the monastery. " The district officers (*Mahāmātrāḥ*) at Kaus'āmbī are similarly instructed. The edict in the manastery of Bairāt (Virāṭapura) or Bhabru, in Rajputana, recalls the attention of Buddhist monks and nuns to seven passages in the Buddhist *Vinaya-piṭaka*, which stress the cultivation by the Buddhist ascetics of personal purity and spirituality rather than mechanical conformity to external appearance.

The implication is that the essential aspect of Buddhism was forgotten in As'oka's day by the Buddhist clergy, and that As'oka's mind was obsessed by the spiritual and ethical rather than the ritualistic side of Buddhism, or, for that matter Brahmanism. It is likely that many copies of these Edicts were deposited in Buddhist monasteries and are now lost. The Rock Edicts which sum up As'oka's aims and ideals are on the frontiers or the extreme limits of the empire from Shabazgarhi near Peshawar to Yerragudi in Kurnul district and from Girnar in Saurāṣṭra to Dhauli and Jaugada in Orissa. The Pillar Edicts which sum up his ethical ideas and which belong to the concluding years of his reign, are in important localities in the heart of the empire. In every instance the location is selected in a manner to compel attention. The massive rocks on well-worn roads or ornamental pillars of great height and beauty are chosen for the inscriptions. The inscriptions that have survived, leaving aside the cave dedications and the Queen's edict, are only about thirty, but many copies of these as standardized were probably made.

Discovery of the Inscriptions

The first person to observe a pillar inscription in modern times was the Roman Catholic priest Tieffenthaler (1756), who saw fragments of the Mirath pillar at Delhi. James Prinsep found in 1837 the key to the As'oka script at about the same time that Sir Henry Rawlinson found the key to the cuneiform inscription at Behistun. In Hiuen Tsiang's time sixteen pillar inscriptions were

known, but of these six have disappeared in spite of their massive size. The Maski fragment was found in 1915 and the Minor Edict and the complete set of the Fourteen Rock Edicts at Yerraguḍi as recently as 1928. Areas which were once populous are now buried in jungle and more copies of the Rock Edicts may yet be discovered. But they cannot materially add to the historic data that the extant inscriptions furnish. We have reached a stage at which the available information regarding the Emperor can be finalized.

Back-ground of As'oka's edicts

A feature of the Edicts is that they are not dated in any era though they contain allusions to incidents or the promulgation of edicts in dates reckoned from the coronation or anointing of the Emperor. The name of As'oka has figured conspicuously in Buddhist legends both in Ceylon and in the North. This is but natural as he was the first great ruler to become a Buddhist. But fact and fiction are so mixed up in the Ceylonese legends, as embodied in the monkish chronicles of the island, the *Mahāvaṁs'a* and the *Dīpavaṁs'a* which belong to the fourth and late fifth centuries A.D., *i.e.*, several centuries after As'oka's time, as well as in the *As'okāvadāna*, a part of the larger *Divyāvadāna*, which collects the northern legends and which is somewhat earlier in date. Isolated legends were noted by Chinese pilgrims who are still later. In their days the secret of the As'oka scripts was lost and they could not be read—a tragic end to the Emperor's hope of their guiding posterity for centuries!

The foundation of the administration in As'oka's time was obviously that built by his grandfather Candragupta of which we have some description in the fragments of Megasthenes and the Greek travellers and a realistic or idealized standard in the *Arthas'astra* of Kauṭilya or Cāṇakya. But in point of authenticity and reliability the Edicts rank highest among the sources. Their truth is as transparent as is their simplicity. Records of their type meant for millions of contemporaries, who would know facts, could not well have concealed or distorted truth. The suggestion by Prof. Charpentier that "it is extremely questionable whether As'oka has laid open to us, or has concealed, the greater part of his own personality," (*JRAS*, 1926, p. 138) is manifestly untenable. The aim of the Edicts, unlike similar historical records, is not to glorify the author or give an account of his achievements as a king, but to appeal to contemporaries and posterity to follow great moral truths. Such references as occur to his own feelings or acts are parts of his spiritual history, designed to show how gradually enlightenment came to him with experience. They reveal his personality in a way in which a deliberate autobiographical record will not.

The Edicts have been submitted to exhaustive examination and studied by many scholars, who have however endeavoured, with doubtful success, to supplement the data furnished by the Edicts by such stories or legends in the monastic chronicles as do not run counter to the edicts. One method of approach is

still open. In spite of the repeated exhortations of As'oka to respect and be liberal to Brāhmaṇa householders and ascetics, and the marked way in which As'oka avoids stressing any but common features of ethics and avoids propagandist Buddhist reaching, the background of life and belief in As'oka's time furnished by *Dharmas'āstra* has not received adequate attention. To form a correct estimate of As'oka, this has to be done. The Buddhist legends, which belong to epochs when definite hostility between Brahmanism and Buddhism was marked, or which emanated in areas in which Brahmanical literature was not much known, have made As'oka a Buddhist Constantine, a missionary and propagandist on a large scale. The Edicts contain nothing to justify this view. That As'oka became first a lay-follower of Buddhism and later on a *bhikkhu* while retaining his regal position is shown by the Edicts. But his propagandism is for ethical elements common to Brahmanism and Buddhism and not for Buddhism as a separate and rival religion. In the background of the Bhabru edict, which collects just those passages in the *Vinaya* which emphasize spirituality rather than ritual in Buddhism, it is not easy even to accept the suggestion that has been made that As'oka's public faith as an Emperor must be distinguished from his personal faith as an individual. The accounts of missions to spread Buddhism in foreign countries in As'oka's day need not be discredited or rejected, especially as the relics of some of the Buddhist teachers selected (according to legends) for the missions

have been discovered; but acceptance of the idea of As'oka's ***public*** patronage of Buddhism as a non-Brahmanical religion and his open and state propaganda on its behalf has to be viewed with caution.

Edicts and Dharmas'āstra

A comparative study of the main teachings of the Edicts and Dharms'āstra teachings will reveal their remarkable similarity. Thus in Rock Edict IX As'oka discriminates between rites and ceremonies performed "on occasions of illness", and rites at marriages, births and before journeys are undertaken and rites done by mothers on behalf of children, which are not futile, but "bear small fruit" and what he called *Dharmamaṅgala*, which even if not fruitful immediately bear fruit in the other world." This view reflects the *Mīmāṁsā* concept of a Dharma act as productive of an invisible quality of the soul, termed *apūrva*, which bears fruit in other worlds and which is the cause of heavenly bliss and final liberation. The distinction he makes is that between an act for a desired end, termed in Dharmas'āstra as *kāmyaphala*, and a moral or unselfish act done without expectation of a desired benefit (*niṣkāmyakarma*). The virtues inculcated in the Edicts are truthfulness (*satyam*), compassion (*dayā*), personal and mental purity (*s'auca*), gentleness, as contrasted with anger and rage (*mārdavam*), *sādhutā*, thrift (*apavyayatā*), self-control (*saṁyama*), purity of heart (*bhāva-s'uddhi*), gratitude (*kṛtajñatā*), firm devotion (*dṛḍhabhakti*) and attachment to Dharma (*Dharmarati*). Among the thirty-two virtues which are catalogued,

along with their opposites or vices, by works on Dharma-s'āstra, these will be found. The selection indicates As'oka's desire to stress those virtues, like thrift and avoidance of excessive riches which make for social peace and security as well as for personal uplift and happiness.

Students of the Edicts do not now interpret the statement in Rock Edict I—" Here no animal shall be killed or sacrificed "—as a prohibition of Vedic Yāga, but view it as either an allusion to the discontinuance of animal slaughter within the palace (which is contrary to other declarations that some animals alone were to be killed for the royal table) or to the slaughter of animals in the palace for gods. In Rock Edict IV As'oka notes that slaughter of animals and cruelty to living beings had been on the increase and he made a beginning in discouraging them. It is wrong to read this as a condemnation of a Vedic Yāga, firstly because a live victim is not necessary for every type of yāga and secondly a Vedic sacrifice ordinarily entails the slaying, after elaborate preparation and expense, of only one animal and it can only be done by *dvijas*. As'oka as a Maurya did not belong to this class, as Candragupta, his grandfather was a *non-dvija*. Slaughter of animals in large numbers has always existed for minor deities of the pantheon and for semi-aboriginal divinities as till recently at Periyapalayam near Madras and Mandakkad in South Travancore. Such slaughter is discountenanced and regarded as futile by Dharma-s'āstra. To read more than As'oka's probable discountenancing the killing of animals on a large scale on

ostensible religious grounds is not justifiable. The idea that As'oka condemned the slaughter of animals from Buddhist affinity is not correct. The Buddhist code for monks (S.B.E. Vol. XI, pp. 71-73) *allowed* three kinds of flesh even for monks: 'the unseen, the unheard and the unsuspected,' interpreted as the flesh of any animal that had not been put to death in the sight of the monks, or was so declared in the hearing of the monk, or was declared in the hearing of the monk as killed for his consumption, or is suspected as specially slain for his benefit. Flesh *outside these classes* was lawful to the Buddhist monk. Meat-eating has been common in all Buddhist countries. Dharmas'āstra (*e.g.*, *Manusmṛti*) discusses the case for and against meat-eating and the verdict is in favour of the abstention, and even the slaying of an animal in a sacrifice is explained as based on a Vedic mandate and on the belief that it insured the salvation (*mukti*) of the victim.[1]

The prohibition of the slaughter (even for food) of pregnant goats or pigs, of the caponizing of cocks, of castration of animals, of the burning of husk (which contains minute animals) and the interdiction of setting fire to forests are all in accord with the tenets of Dharmas'āstra, and Brahmanical rules long in vogue before As'oka. The smṛtis no more encouraged meat-eating than Buddhism condemned it. As'oka's prohibition of the slaughter of some animals, even for food, is in accord generally with Dharmaṣāstra, as well as the prohibition of killing of animals for food on stated

[1] *Manusmṛti*, V, *vv*. 26-53.

days which are the Brahmanical fast or *s'rāddha* days (Pillar Edict V). There are small differences between the Dharmas'āstra views and the specification in the Edicts, but these are not wider than the differences between *smṛti* and *smṛti*, *e.g.*, Vasiṣṭha, Manu and Yājñavalkya. The two last allow the eating of the meat of the rhinoceros which Vasiṣṭha and Baudhāyana ban. Tortoises and porcupines are among the five-toed (*pañcanakha*) animals whose flesh alone in this class is permitted to be eaten (See *Rāmāyaṇa*, IV, xvii, 37-38). The fifty-six days in the year in which fish was prohibited from being caught or killed or eaten are those on which they are interdicted by the smṛtis also. The prohibition of castration of certain animals (bulls, rams, pigs) as well as the caponizing of cocks is equally banned by Dharmas'āstra. So is the ban on the burning of husk, which may contain insects, and the firing of jungles for destroying the animals within them (Pillar Edict V). So is the ban on the slaughter of ewes with suckling lambs etc. or animals that are pregnant. Dharmas'āstra terms such action as *bhrūṇahatyā*, a grave sin. The flesh of the peacock is forbidden for eating by most smṛtis but As'oka not only permits it but was himself for a long time accustomed to consume it. The differences may be viewed as recalling the people to the need to abide by ancient inhibitions in such respects at a time when laxity in observing the rules had spread.

The commendation of pilgrimages (*tīrtha-yātrā*), of gifts (*dāna*), liberality to Brāhmaṇas and of 'pious'

works of public utility, such as the planting of trees and groves, especially of fruit trees, of the erection of rest-houses (*satra*) and water-sheds for wayfarers, of the excavation of tanks and wells, the substitution of royal pilgrimages to holy places for the old pleasure tours (*vihārayātrā*) or hunts, are all in the spirit of Dharmas'āstra, which places such works, termed *pūrta*, even above sacrifices (*iṣṭa*) in regard to their spiritual efficacy. In the scale of smṛti values more importance is ascribed to those acts of humanity and reverence such as the considerate treatment of servants and slaves and deference and liberality to teachers (*guru*), Brāhmaṇas and saṇyāsins (termed *s'ramaṇas* in the Edicts)[1]—than to the customary auspicious rites that women are fond of, and they are more appropriately *Dharmamaṅgala*. Altruistic action begets postmortuary rewards in *svarga* while rites for specific objects (*kāmya*) result only in smaller rewards in this life. Digests of Dharmas'āstra stress the value of these so much that special sections are devoted to their elaboration. As'oka's conception of Dharma is virtually a reproduction of the Mīmāṁas'a-Vais'eṣika definition of the term, *viz.*, that which produces an invisible quality of the soul termed *apūrva*, which causes heavenly bliss and leads to final emancipation. The seclusion of royal or rich women in special apartments (*avarodha*) to which he alludes is a feature of classical Brahmanic life.

The term *Dharma* has a wide range of meaning and application. The idea that it was a special Buddhist

[1] Vide Rock Edict IX.

term *Dhamma* and stood both in its substantive and adjectival forms only for the idea peculiar to Buddhism is incorrect. As'oka's Dharma is in fact only the Brahmanic concept, in its wide range of application. To translate it as "Law of Piety" is to give it a wrong orientation, especially when the piety is held to be that upheld by Buddhism. Used adjectively in a wide popular sense it stands only for 'right' or 'proper' or 'just' (*dharmavijaya*), *e.g.*, a conquest made after following the proper usages of war, as pointed out in the note on p. 49. In the Kaliṅga compaign the rules of righteous war were flagrantly violated. Non-combatants suffered both directly and indirectly, the innocent with the soldiers. Dharmas'āstra has clear rules as to what is permissible and what is not so in war. Arthas'āstra also upholds these as norms. Megasthenes and Greek visitors noted with admiration that when armies marched and fought within the Magadhan kingdom the cultivator went about his work undisturbed. In Bāṇa's *Harṣacarita*, which depicts conditions in North India in the seventh century A.D., nearly a thousand years after the foundation of the Mauryan rule and the establishment of its standards of government, mention is made of the manner in which soldiers on the march who trampled on standing crops were subjected to stoning by the cultivators and stood it without reprisal.

Dhamma of the Edicts not purely Buddhist

The Kaliṅga war described in terms of remorse and poignant grief by As'oka himself in Rock Edict

XIII involved for so small an area the slaughter of a hundred thousand, the enslavement of half as many more and the death and suffering of yet more among whom were Brāhmaṇas, S'ramaṇas, women and children. This was *āsuravijaya.* It is possible to read into As'oka's words a remorse born of personal knowledge of all that occurred either during the campaign or immediately after it. The two Kaliṅga Edicts guarantee to the conquered state and its surviving people security from unlawful imprisonment (as suspects in a newly conquered area are likely to suffer from administrative zeal) and equal treatment to the people of Kaliṅga with those elsewhere in the empire. This is the principle underlying the repeated assurance in the Edicts that " *all* people are my children, " *i.e.*, the conquered people are entitled to the same paternal care and kindness as the subjects in the home provinces. Righteous rule knows no barriers. The officers in Kaliṅga are warned that they owe a debt to their Ruler which can be discharged only by carrying out faithfully his humane intentions not only to the people of Kaliṅga, till lately enemies, but also to the semi-barbarous people on the frontiers (the jungle tribes). Kaliṅga was apparently the only area that had been left unconquered by As'oka's predecessors. In a war with Kaliṅga in the times of the Nandas, it was overrun and a famous Jaina idol from it was carried away to Pāṭalīputra, from which it was recovered by King Kharavela of Kaliṅga in B.C. 162 in his second invasion of Magadha. It is open to read into the sanguinary

and ruthless war of Kaliṅga in As'oka's time fierce resistance which made it necessary to allow acts of "frightfulness" condemned by the recognized laws of war (*dharmavijaya*). The kingdom of Kaliṅga extended from the Vaitaraṇī to the Godāvarī (probably) and its geographical position has always made it immune from easy conquest. The measures of conciliation devised by As'oka for Kaliṅga included the placing of it under a royal prince as Viceroy—a practice of Mauryan administration following the wise advice of Kauṭilya to train up princes in administration. It will be noticed that three other princely viceroys in As'oka's empire were placed in Takṣas'ilā (in the difficult Gāndhāra country), Ujjain (to the western marches) and in Suvarṇagiri in the extreme south of the empire to watch the southern frontier. The Kaliṅga Edicts are, in substance and spirit, charters. They are, as in the case of the Brahmagiri Edicts, addressed to the local officers, who had to be warned to carry out the Emperor's intentions faithfully and zealously.

Dhamma and Rājadharma

As'oka refers to his solicitude for the welfare of his subjects and his tireless work. He was always to be accessible to the work of the empire, wherever he might be. That this is the royal ideal and that the welfare of the king and the people are inseparable are taught by Arthas'āstra and Dharmas'āstra. ***Prajāsukhe sukhaṁ rājñam***—says Kauṭilya. The king must consider not his inclinations but the good of the subjects (Kauṭilya, ch. x).

As'oka applies the doctrine of 'natal debt' to the relation of king and subject and of the king and his officers. He discharges his duty to all living beings by righteous rule; and the officers discharge their debt to their master by faithfully carrying out his beneficent intentions towards the people. This indebtedness extends to *all men*, like that of a father to his children. This is why As'oka repeats the declaration: "*All* men are my children" (Kaliṅga Edict II, p. 60). The conception is obviously based on the doctrine of the relation of all souls to one another as in the Vedāntic doctrine of the relation of the selves to the Self, though not so stated explicitly by As'oka. This idea along with those of Karma, Saṁsāra and Redemption are all implicit in the Edicts.

These features have made many modern scholars reject the view that the ideas in the Edicts are exclusively those of Buddhism, *i.e.* as it was in its full development. They point out that As'oka's Dharma is mainly the Rājadharma of Dharmas'āstra, *i.e.* of Brahmanism. They recall the frequent appeals to considerate action towards the veneration for Brāhmaṇas and Brāhmaṇa ascetics, and to the absence of any exhortation for similar attitude to Buddhist monks (*bhikṣu*). Buddhism, like Jainism, has exalted the ascetic life and placed the monk above the householder (*gṛhastha*). Dharmas'āstra, on the other hand, while recognizing the spiritual value of the ascetic life of renunciation, exalts that of the householder and rightly regards it as the foundation of society and the

householder as the supporter of all others, *i.e.* the novice (*brahmacārin*), the recluse (*vānaprastha*) and the ascetic (*sanyāsin*). The spread of monasticism means the gradual extinction of society. In Rock Edict XIII As'oka insists that on the householders lie all social duties, *e.g.* service to the aged, service to parents and teachers, duty to dependents and duty to society (*inf.* p. 41).

As'oka's religious attitude

As'oka's references to his missionary activities are not to the spread of any religion and particularly of Buddhism, but to the spread of the broad ethical principles specified in the Edicts over and over again, in the spread of humane activities, in the opening of hospitals for man and beast even in foreign countries under non-Indian rulers, for the recognition of the moral basis of all religions and for the creation of a spirt of toleration to all religions. This last is the spirit of the *Bhagavadgītā* (IX, 22). Greek travellers noted that in Candragupta's days the Brāhmaṇas and S'ramanas, austere ascetics and householders, who lived outside the capital were frequently consulted and greatly honoured by the King and the people.[1] As'oka continued the practice. Whether out of policy or conviction, As'oka repeatedly declares his attachment to Brahmanism. Most students of As'oka's life take this view. Dr. F. W. Thomas goes further. He stresses As'oka's not mentioning anywhere in the Edicts ideas that are distinctively Buddhistic like "the four grand truths," the "noble Eightfold

[1] M'Crindle, *Ancient India*, 1901, pp. 170-171.

Path," the chain of causation, the word and idea of Nirvāṇa, and concludes that As'oka could not be described as a Buddhist. This view is an extreme one. The Edicts were addressed to all people and not to Buddhists only. Only common elements can be stressed in them. Common folk are not likely to understand philosophical ideas like ***Mukti*** or ***Nirvāṇa***, while the idea of a Heaven (***svarga***) as the goal of righteous conduct will be intelligible to them. ***Svarga*** is mentioned thrice in the Edicts but ultimate redemption not even once.

As'oka a Buddhist

But in the light of his own declarations of having joined the Buddhist fold and of having been first a lay follower and later on a monk (without divesting himself of his regal duties) and of the inscriptions that record his pilgrimage to the Buddhist Holy Land, and his specific appeals to the Buddhists in the Sārnāth, Kaus'āmbi and Bhabru Edicts, it is undeniable that he became and remained a Buddhist but of a tolerant and unexclusive type. He is not tired of condemning fanatic attacks on the religions of others made under the belief that thereby one exalts one's own faith. He insists on the common ethical or spiritual elements in all religions and sees only identities where others note only differences. The insistence on honour to Brāhmaṇas and S'ramaṇas may reflect the need to correct among Buddhists a tendency to run them down. The suggestion has been made by an historian that As'oka's public religion and personal religion must be differentiated. This is unnecessary. Buddhism was

only making its lead in the Mauryan epoch. As′oka had become a member of the Buddhist fraternity ***before*** the Kaliṅga war, *i.e.* in the early years of the reign. The Ceylonese and North Indian legends about As′oka belong to periods centuries later than his time. By that time Brahmanism and Buddhism stood out as entirely separate and rival cults and social organizations. These legends emanate from areas in which the Brahmanical social system was not known. When As′oka was a prince and the Viceroy at Ujjain he is credited by the legend with having married a lady of the Vais′ya caste who is also represented, in another place, as of the Buddha's clan, *i.e.* the S′ākyas. The latter, however, claimed to be Kṣatriyas. Either marriage would have been *pratiloma* and created opposition in those days. This is only an illustration of the unreliability of these sources and of their ignorance of social taboos. For a long time the followers of the Buddha could not have been regarded as completely cut away from Brahmanical society. They stood only for a modified social organization of the *varaṇās′rama* system, allowed asceticism to the last *varṇa* to which Brahmanism denied it, and did not accept the ultimate authority of the Vedas. In other respects, the theological and mythological ideas, the philosophical ideas of Karma, transmigration and ultimate release or ascent to *svarga* were common to both. The cleavage which widened with the centuries was not then so clear and visible. This would have been the attitude of even the Buddha, and was obviously that of As′oka and is given expression to in the Edicts.

The Edicts give dates for certain events or acts in terms of the years from As'oka's coronation.

Chronology of the Edicts

The Ceylonese and other legends along with many incredible stories of his having put to death a hundred brothers after his accession to the throne, state that an interval of about four years existed between the death of Bindusāra and the coronation of As'oka, though they add that the accession was peaceful. This period has been accepted by modern writers; and attempts have been made to explain it. It is probable that there was really an interval but a short one. When a king dies his heirs and relations are under a pollution and the period in which this impurity lasts is one in which no auspicious act can be done. As'oka's pollution on his father's death must have extended to a month as he was not a *dvija*. It is not lucky to reckon from inauspicious days. As'oka asks prisoners to be released on the date of his coronation and bans the killing of animals on two asterisms, *Tiṣya* and *Punarvasu*. The first was probably his natal asterism and the other that on which the coronation took place. In this view, the dates in B.C. given in modern books have to be put back by about four years. Counting from *abhiṣeka* is a wide-spread custom.[1] The Imperial Cola rulers counted dates even from their installation as Yuvarājas. The Purāṇas agree in giving As'oka's father and grandfather reigns of 25 and 24 years respectively. As the reign of the former is held to have begun about B.C. 323, that

[1] cf. *Rāmāyaṇa*, Ayodhyā Kāṇḍa, Sarga 2.

of As'oka must be held to have begun in B.C. 274. As he is said to have ruled for 42 years, his death must have occurred about B.C. 232.

On this hypothesis the dates of the chief events mentioned in the Edicts will have to be revised thus: Accession and *abhiṣeka* B.C. 274; joining the Buddhist fraternity 269; conquest of Kaliṅga 266; closer connection with the Saṁgha 266; issue of the Minor Rock Edicts 264; issue of the two Kaliṅga Edicts, 263; issue of the Fourteen Rock Edicts 262, institution of Dharma-mahāmātrās (R. E. V.) 261; enlargement of the stūpa of Buddha Koṇākamana 260; pilgrimage to Lumbini and the erection of pillars at the place 254; issue of the Pillar Edicts 247-2; and death 232 B.C. The revised chronology will not conflict with the common dates of the Hellenic kings mentioned in Rock Edict II.

As'oka's Administrative System

The administrative system of As'oka, judging from the allusions in the Edicts, marked no great change in the structure that is depicted in the Greek accounts and the *Arthas'āstra.* There was a graded bureaucracy, ranging from the provincial governor to district and sub-district officers and rising to the emperor. In the case of four important viceroyalties the position was held (according to precedent) by princes of the blood who had their own ministers and advisers as the Emperor had. The admonition to local officers to tour about their areas is only a repetition of what must have been a routine direction of administration. The

Indian King is *solely* responsible for the conduct, peace and happiness of the people and ministers are only advisers. The concept of a king ruling through constitutional ministers alone which makes it possible to say that "the king can do no wrong" is alien to Indian ideals. But ministers are men of experience, not favourites, and are usually hereditary. Even outsiders could rise in the service to high office, *e.g.*, Tuṣāspa, who was governor of Kathiawar in Candragupta's reign and repaired the dam of the great lake Girnar. The viceroys could be transferred. As′oka is himself said to have been viceroy at Takṣas′ilā and Ujjain. The viceroyalties at Tos′āli (in Kaliṅga) and Suvarṇagiri (in the southern marches) were probably created by As′oka. The cession of territory by Seleucus made the empire extend from the frontiers of Persia to the Bay of Bengal. It was a far larger empire than even British India. The innovations made by As′oka are mainly imposing on his local officers the duty of moral supervision and propaganda in the terms of the Edicts. The office of "censor of morals" whose jurisdiction extended even to the royal family was perhaps an innovation, though in accordance with the spirit of Indian polity.

The Army

The great army, the largest of the time and created by Candragupta, apparently continued to be maintained. Peace and pacific intentions do not imply disarmament. The experience of the Macedonian invasion and of the invasion of Seleucus as well as the Kaliṅga episode must have made the retention of the vast army necessary.

As'oka no Autocrat

That the Emperor's supervision of local officers was effective and efficient is reflected in the terms of the Edicts, which contain admonition and advice as well as reproof, and in the fidelity with which his orders for the publication of the edicts were carried out. A ruler who is tireless in labouring for the good of his subjects sets an example to all his servants. The vast system of espionage, to which both the Hellenic accounts and the *Arthas'astra* refer, must have been efficient and the Emperor must have been kept abreast of all that happened everywhere in his vast dominions. These features make modern writers, who use political terms that are inapplicable to ancient India, describe As'oka as an *autocrat*, though a benevolent one. An absolute ruler is one who recognizes no authority above him. In Indian political thought and practice it is not the king who rules but it is Dharma, helped by the power of enforcing Dharma, termed '*Daṇḍa*' or 'sanction.' A king has no power to change Dharma. His fiat will not run against traditional Dharma. It is so with both Brahmanical as well as Buddhist rulers. As'oka mentions only one small change he made in criminal procedure. Instead of executing a capital sentence at once, as was the practice, he gave three days' grace to the sentenced criminal to make his peace with this and the other world. The release of prisoners on the anniversaries of the royal birthday did not mean pardoning them but remissions of sentence. In the Indian conception punishment is synonymous,

in effect as in the name, with expiation (*prāyas'citta*). A felon may escape justice in this world but not the justice inherent in the Law of Karma. The *small* changes made even in the killing of animals for food reflect this spirit of loyalty to ancient rules.

The discipline that As'oka would impose on his subjects as well as all others is moral discipline, submission to ethical truths. Family discipline is the sure foundations of social stability and political loyalty. It is this which makes As'oka repeat the old advice, found in the Upaniṣads, to revere and honour parents teachers, renunciates, the aged and those deserving, honour. Some of the injunctions of As'oka, like his advice to practise thrift, and austerity in life, enshrine a wisdom whose value we can recognize today when the existence of excessive wealth and poverty side by side is a cause of disruption. Discipline (*vinaya*) is ennobled in Indian literature, Brahmanical and Buddhistic. It is not submission to himself that As'oka asks for but loyalty to ancient moral rules of life. No state rescripts contain so much practical wisdom as the Edicts.

It may be inferred from the Edicts that As'oka came to a great heritage after peace and order had been well-established within the vast empire, and had been so for may years. It implies that the conquest of the Dakhan area must have been long anterior to his accession. Though born in the purple, he did not come to the throne without experience or at an immature age. His long reign was unclouded by any

disturbance. He outlines policies at the beginning of the reign and saw them carried out up to his last years. The Edicts are in Prākṛt, and not in the sacred tongues of either Brahmanism or Buddhism. Though incised in two scripts, the Kharoṣṭhi and Brāhmī, both seem to have been understood by the scribes, who saw to the execution of the inscriptions. The Yerragudi Edict which is in Brāhmī script is signed by the scribe Cavada in Kharoṣṭhi. The selection of the *spoken* dialects for the Edicts implies first, the existence of a common language throughout the wide empire, and secondly, fairly wide-spread ability to read. Two modern ideals of the Indian Republic were thus anticipated and realized twenty-three centuries ago !

Landmarks of the As'okan epoch

Historians estimate greatness in rulers by different standards. The attempts made, with indifferent success, to compare As'oka with various great rulers, shows that he has some qualities which make him resemble each of them. The legends that he was a Buddhist propagandist and was a zealous votary of the new religion he had embraced suggests a comparison with Constantine. His intense sincerity and direct and almost abrupt speech (as recorded in the Edicts) suggest a resemblance to Oliver Cromwell. Austerity and a philosophical bias make for a comparison with Marcus Aurelius. His gentleness and chivalry seem to resemble the qualities of the mythical King Arthur. In spite of the decisive

As'oka's place in history

conquest of Kaliṅga in *one* short campaign, no one has suggested a likeness between him and the great military leaders of history. Akbar's qualities are seen in his tolerance but what was the result of intellectual ***curiosity*** in Akbar is the result of deep and abiding religious ***faith*** in As'oka. The best way of appraising his worth is to judge him by the results of his rule. For over forty years the greatest empire of his time enjoyed peace and tranquility, freedom from external attacks and from internal disturbance, so much so that As'oka believed that the happy conditions would persist for generations. This was not due to luck or accident but to his unceasing labour for the public weal, wise statesmanship, a proper sense of values and unsurpassed moral integrity. As'oka was a great soul as well as a great king.

The carrying out of the Emperor's orders faithfully even in regions thousands of miles from Pāṭalīputra suggests good though slow means of communication and transport through the empire. The great monolithic pillars on which, after their erection as pillars of victory, ***jayastambha***, he had the seven edicts incised would each weigh fifty tons. They are all from the stone quarries of Chunar Hills near Banaras. To have transported them over hundreds of miles, and over some of the broadest and deepest of unbridged North Indian rivers, suggests feats of engineering that cannot be surpassed even today. The finish of the columns, their beautiful capitals and their artistic excellence reflect high standards of artistic achievement.

The great Emperor was not the head of a vast region of uncivilized peoples. In his day no other area of the world enjoyed the same material prosperity, had such deep spirituality and a government so well-organized, benevolent and efficient. Nor have later empires excelled that of As'oka. The success of the Emperor lay more in his conservation of the institutions of his father and grandfather and in making only such changes as were needed to suit the times. For a successful conqueror at the head of an immense army to uphold the ideal of universal peace, and to overcome the lust for fresh conquests are proofs of self-mastery. That this peace-lover was not indulging in a rhetorical statement when he said, "All people are my children," is proved by this act of transcendent restraint.

Conclusion—As'oka and India's destiny

The great historian who described history as "little more than the register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind," was moved to enthusiasm when he summed up the features of the Age of the Antonines. If a man were called upon to fix the period in the history of the world when the condition of the human race was most happy and prosperous, he would without hesitation name that which elapsed from the death of Domitian to the accession of Commodus. The vast extent of the Roman Empire was governed by absolute power under the guidance of virtue and wisdom. The armies were restrained by the firm and gentle hands of four successive emperors whose

character and authority commanded involuntary respect. The forms of civil administration were carefully preserved by Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian and the Antonines, who delighted in the image of liberty and were pleased to consider themselves the accountable ministers of the law. Such princes deserved the honour of restoring the Republic had the Romans of their days been capable of enjoying a rational freedom (Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, edited by Bury, I, 78). It is to such an age that we might well compare the reign of As'oka, and in almost the same measure, the fifty years that preceded his accession.

Today, we are reviving almost unconciously the ideals of As'oka and placing the emblems that adorned his pillars everywhere as those of reborn India. Our leaders preach to nations the message of peace and good will to all nations, and with great armed forces resist the temptation to engage in war even in the face of provocation. Fanaticism is met by tolerance. The lions that stood four-square on As'oka's columns as watchers of the quarters and as representing the noble 'lion of the S'ākyas' (*S'ākyasiṁha*), the Wheel of Dharma' (*Dharmacakra*) whose ceaseless revolution makes for the triumph of the higher over the lower in life, the lotus (*Padma*) whose beauty and fragrance reflect those of the righteous soul, the Elephant and the Bull, which denote strength tamed for beneficent human use, are all now among the cherished emblems of India. We are reviving unconsciously the ideal of

a common language for India, which As'oka had realized, as also of a common script. Like As'oka we are contacting foreign nations and endeavouring to convey to them the age-long messages of India. The As'okan ideal of the equality of all men before the law and in their claim to equal consideration by the State is implicit in the declaration of universal suffrage. We combine the autonomy of the component states with central supervision, control and guidance. Like As'oka we have effaced old political markings that divided the land into rival kingdoms.

In the face of vicissitudes that have been borne with fortitude and of harassment in a bellicose world which still thinks in terms of demoniac warfare (*āsura-vijaya*), we look to the future with calmness and hope sustained by our feelings of good-will to all, and our faith in the high destiny of our motherland and in the ultimate triumph of good over evil. By accident or destiny we are moving on lines that made the Mauryan Age so memorable. The first President of the Indian Republic comes from Magadha, and the common language and script of India are those of that ancient kingdom which gave birth to As'oka. Like him we strive to overcome violence by non-violence, having like him learnt the futility and horror of even successful war. May the Power, that inspires morals and watches over the destinies of nations and of all living beings, help to bring to Bhāratavarṣa another Golden Age, reminiscent of the great and noble Emperor, who, in the plenitude of power and prosperity, held himself

to be the servant of Dharma and delighted to term himself as the seeker of the good of all others (*priyadarsi*) and therefore the Beloved of the Gods (*Devānāmpriyaḥ*) !

Namo Dharmāya

PHĀLGUNA-TIṢYA,
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